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Questioning the Assassination Report

The Senate Intelligence Committee's veiled charge that President Eisenhower personally authorized the assassination of the Congo's Patrice Lumumba in 1960 has triggered a backlash against the Committee, raising the first serious doubt among outsiders of its objectivity.

Oddly, the backlash does not come from the Committee's Republican minority. Rather, Eisenhower's highest White House aides believe he was uniquely singled out for special blame on the basis of one middle-rank witness whose testimony was totally and flatly repudiated by his superiors.

Since the assassination report was signed by all four Republicans on the Committee, the anger among Eisenhower's aides is not yet supported by Republican Senators. This could change, however, if the case now being made against the treatment of Eisenhower is specifically considered by the Committee.

Whichever the case, the unusual treatment of Eisenhower raises a suspicion over the objectivity of Chairman Frank Church of Idaho, an obvious Democratic presidential hopeful. He can now be accused of more solicitous treatment for a Democratic President, John F. Kennedy, in the Castro and other assassination plots.

The Committee's report states: "The chain of events revealed by the documents and testimony is strong enough to permit a reasonable inference that the plot to assassinate Lumumba was authorized by President Eisenhower." That sentence is followed by this caveat: "There is enough countervailing testimony by Eisenhower administration officials and enough ambiguity and lack of clarity...to preclude the Committee from making a finding that the President intended an assassination effort against Lumumba."

Gordon Gray, Eisenhower's National Security Assistant in 1960, bitterly protested in a private meeting with the Committee's staff ten days ago. His complaint: The equal treatment of testimony from a single middle-level White House aide with that of all Eisenhower's top advisers.

The aide on whose testimony the Committee based its equivocal charge against Eisenhower was Robert H. Johnson, a staffer of the National Security Council (NSC) who was a note-taker in only two NSC sessions at which Eisenhower was present during his entire administration.

Sen. Church:
A question of objectivity.

Testifying before the Church Committee last June, Johnson said that during one of those two NSC sessions "President Eisenhower said something—I can no longer remember his words—that came across to me as an order for the assassination of Lumumba...there was no discussion; the meeting simply moved on." Later in his testimony, Johnson said: "I must confess that in thinking about the incident more recently I have had some doubts."

Gray's protest to the Committee staff followed by one day a letter to Church from retired Army Gen. Andrew J. Goodpaster, Eisenhower's chief military adviser inside the White House (who later became Supreme Allied Commander of NATO).

Goodpaster, who testified in July on covert intelligence operations during the Eisenhower administration, excoriated the report for highlighting Johnson's uncorroborated testimony while having "so watered down" the rebuttals from Gray, himself and other Eisenhower aides "as to serve to submerge, rather than clarify, (Eisenhower's) true attitude in this matter."

Goodpaster wrote Church that there had been no single instance "within my knowledge and memory" of an assassination "course of action" proposed to Eisenhower either in or outside NSC meetings.

Particularly infuriating to Goodpaster and Gray was the Committee's contrasting choice of words and phraseology in the Lumumba case as compared to the case of Fidel Castro, in which all Presidents were exonerated from assassination charges.

"In view of the strained chain of assumptions and the contrary tesitimony of all the Presidential advisers, the men closest to both Eisenwhower and (John F.) Kennedy, the Committee makes no finding implicating Presidents who are not able to speak for themselves," the Committee reported in dismissing Presidential anti-Castro involvements.

In its handling of the Lumumba affair, the Committee gave equal weight to Johnson, on the one hand, and to Eisenhower's most intimate advisers, on the other. Yet it did not use the words "the men closest to" Eisenhower in referring to Gray and Goodpaster but rather the more distant and formal phrase "Eisenhower administration officials."

Gray and Goodpaster are not alone in angrily protesting treatment of Eisenhower. Eisenhower's naval aide, retired Rear Admiral Evan P. Aurand, wrote Church last week that Eisenhower had talked to him about assassination as a tool of policy, but always in the negative. Aurand said Eisenhower told him "They might bring a wave of retaliatory assassinations," wrecking world peace.

Whether private recriminations from Eisenhower loyalists to the Democratic-controlled Intelligence Committee will change the wording of the poisonous "interim" report when the Committee adopts a final report next year is not known. The bitter protest could lead to emotional demands from Republicans for even-handed treatment for all Presidents; or, repelled by the noxious assassination publicity already damaging this nation's reputation, the Republicans could decide to let the matter die.

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